

Introduction

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A quote often attributed to Mark Twain recommends: “Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint” (qtd. in Miller and Blevins). While such dangers may hold for medical publications, papers that deal with matters of health from a cultural and literary studies perspective usually do not kill their readers. Nevertheless, the topic of health still has the potential to cut to the core of a large spectrum of aspects and multiple dimensions of politics, society, and culture. In this regard, the eighth issue of *aspeers* features a topical section that explores different facets of American health. In its nontopical section, the journal additionally highlights a wide range of themes and approaches within the field of American studies. With the present issue, the editorial team once again publishes the scholarly work of graduate students to ensure it receives the attention it deserves. We will use this space to provide a short overview of the general themes and specific findings of this year’s contributions and professorial voice.

In her article “Gentrify? No! Gentefy? Sí!: Urban Redevelopment and Ethnic Gentrification in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles,” Mareike Ahrens explores the notions of gentrification and gentefication to come to terms with recent developments in a predominantly Latino neighborhood. Ahrens observes that instead of an urban renewal of lower-class neighborhoods from the outside (gentrification), the Boyle Heights Latino community aims to improve the neighborhood from within to maintain the area’s ethnic character (gentefication). She argues, however, that the notion of gentefication marks a deeply ambivalent and contradictory interrelation of bottom-up movements and top-down estate development. To support her argument Ahrens discusses and evaluates the public discourse and media coverage of gentefication in this area. With her case study, she shows how concepts of ethnicity and class shape the Latino community in Boyle Heights and by extension in other urban spaces in the US.

Carolin Benack demonstrates in “Subtraction from Supply and Demand: Challenges to Economic Theory, Representational Power, and Systems of Reference in Melville’s ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’” that the interpretative range of Melville’s canonical short story is far from exhausted. With an emphasis on the connection between the

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laissez-faire economic policy of the late-nineteenth-century US, the human psyche, and fundamental questions of free will, Benack examines how Bartleby's signature phrase "I would prefer not to" (Melville 11) challenges conventional modes of representation as well as economic means of production. She argues that the scrivener introduces an alternative work ethic, which the capitalist supply-and-demand logic fails to capture. Although Bartleby establishes a psychological loophole to escape the necessity to produce and consume, the author infers that this resistance remains unsuccessful and ultimately ends up reaffirming traditional modes of economic representation. Thus adding to established readings, Benack's complex interpretation offers new perspectives to approach this classic short story.

In "Hottentot Barbie' as Multicultural Star: The Commodification of Race in Nicki Minaj's Music Videos," Sören Schoppmeier analyzes the dynamics of the American artist's effective self-positioning as a genuinely multicultural pop star who simultaneously draws on and violates established sociocultural conventions. Focusing on the ways Minaj utilizes her sexualized body and explicit lyrics in her music videos, Schoppmeier examines how the pop diva consciously exploits and deconstructs perceptions of whiteness and blackness, thereby transgressing established dichotomies of race and gender. Spanning a wide range of topics from contemporary ethnic beauty standards to cultural markers of race and commodification, the author suggests that Minaj's success results from, in Jess Butler's words, "her refusal to stay in any one representational box for long" (51). In his in-depth analysis, Schoppmeier demonstrates how the provocative rapper/singer occupies a singular and progressive, yet not entirely unproblematic cultural space that enables her to sell both blackness and whiteness to an ethnically diverse audience.

In his contribution "Within the Circle': Space and Surveillance in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*," Felix Haase negotiates concepts of surveillance and space in Douglass' slave narrative. Combining Lotmann's theory of aesthetic space with Foucault's approaches to the Panopticon and panoptic surveillance, Haase discusses panopticism to include not only physical but also metaphorical and literary space in the text. He argues that (metaphorical) space is actually created through surveillance and expands the discussion of Douglass's canonical work. His article offers new insights into a cornerstone of African American literature by analyzing the relation between physical and metaphorical boundaries. This enables a deeper understanding not only of different notions of space and surveillance but also of Douglass's journey from slavery to freedom.

With his second publication in *aspeers*, Simon Daniel Whybrew provides our topical section with a reading of the *House, M.D.* episode "Skin Deep." His article "'The Ultimate Woman Is a Man': An Analysis of Medical Authority and the (In)Visibility of Intersexuality in *House, M.D.*" scrutinizes medical authority and the representation of

intersexuality in this episode as well as imposed and implied heteronormative standards. To do so, Whybrew considers Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's theory of the medical gaze. Examining this specific episode of *House, M.D.*, which has sparked an intense debate regarding the stigmatization of intersexuality in the US, the paper points to the connection between medical authority in cultural representations of modern biomedicine and intersexuality in American culture.

In her topical contribution "The Negotiation of Vegetarianism as a Remedy for an American Sociocultural Schizophrenia in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*," Michaela Beck argues that Foer's personal accounts of vegetarianism and factory farming suggest that vegetarianism can possibly remedy an existing state of sociocultural schizophrenia in the US. Beck explores the portrayal of the psychological mechanisms that are involved in meat consumption by considering the narrator's experiences in connection to the larger cultural framework. Additionally, the author analyzes to what extent the rhetoric of the American jeremiad incorporated in Foer's text supports the argument of considering a meatless diet in order to achieve mental well-being.

Also adding a perspective on American health, as well as on many other facets of American studies, *aspeers* is proud to introduce Philip John Davies as this year's professorial voice. He is Director of the Eccles Centre for American Studies at The British Library in London and President of the European Association for American Studies (EAAS). Davies also is Professor emeritus of American studies at De Montfort University in Leicester and has, during his career, taught at London University's School of Advanced Study and the Universities of Manchester and Maryland, among many others. As an expert on US election campaigns, he provides invaluable insights into the political and sociocultural dimensions of American health, as well as the upcoming 2016 presidential elections. Davies has published extensively in the field of politics: He is the author of *Elections USA* and numerous articles and book chapters, coauthor of the textbook *Politics USA* and *A Brief Introduction to US Politics*. Recently, he wrote the preface to *The Health of the Nation*, the proceedings for the 2012 EAAS Conference held at Ege University in Izmir, Turkey. In his contribution for *aspeers*, he talks about the Affordable Care Act, its possible impacts on the 2016 elections, and about his views on American studies as a field.

With its topical as well as its nontopical contributions, the eighth issue of *aspeers* thus once again offers a platform for a number of diverse perspectives and voices within the scholarly nexus that is American studies. The editorial team is delighted to invite the readers to explore six outstanding articles by emerging voices in the field of American studies.

WORKS CITED

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